



Henderson County Department of Public Health

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Questions/ Comments about COVID-19

April 15- April 20, 2020

The following is a summary of the COVID-19 Q&A Forum from April 21, 2020, addressing questions and comments received from members of the general public.

Public Health's answers are in Blue

Emergency Management's answers are in Purple

Some duplicated and lengthy questions and comments are summarized for brevity.

Introduction:

Chairman Hawkins introduced a chart that indicates the spikes in COVID-19 positive cases in Henderson County. Discussion revealed that the spikes are attributed to batches of testing in Long Term Care Facilities (LTCF).

Topic #1 – Data regarding cases in Henderson County

Many of the questions received were regarding data specific to Henderson County

We are in process of creating a more robust dashboard. We have dedicated staff to sorting through and validating the data. It'll look very similar to the dashboard the NC DHHS presents. The new data dashboard will be posted on the public health website this week, it will be updated daily.

Numbers as of April 20, 2020:

- More than 700 tests have been completed
- 129 total positive cases / 99 of which are connected to LTCFs.
- 13 deaths/ all tied to LTCFs

Topic #2 – Recovery Rates:

Several people asked about recovery rates of people who have tested positive. Since many of the cases were recently identified, we are not yet at a point where we could inquire about "recovery" with each affected individual. The other consideration is that most of our current cases are associated with LTCFs and defining "recovery" for that group will look different than the general population. We believe the majority of the coronavirus cases here, particularly those less than 65 years of age and/or without serious health conditions, will recover as evidenced in other countries.

Some asked for specifics about the people who have tested positive or who have died. We cannot comment on specific health conditions of confirmed cases or deaths. Since the number of any hospitalized COVID-19 patient is often very small (only 1 or in the single digits), those numbers are not being disclosed because they could lead to identification of the individuals. However, our new dashboard will provide timely information that will address most of the questions posed to us to date. It is worth noting that the NC DHHS dashboard does not report recoveries.

Topic #2 – Testing and Contact Tracing

Some people asked why our numbers are higher than neighboring counties, and whether testing is available.

Henderson County is outpacing other counties in reported cases with the help of many partners, including our hospitals and community health center. Therefore, we have been able to accomplish more testing. Collaborative partnerships with our LTCFs have allowed us to conduct testing quickly, as soon as they have identified a singular symptomatic individual. That initial testing, along with intensive contact tracing and expanded testing, has led to the identification of numerous cases. It has been important to identify these early. We have a higher per capita rate of LTCF's, so we have higher level of exposure.

COVID-19 testing capacity here has been limited, as in all counties, but has consistently been prioritized for those with the highest needs and our capacity continues to expand. I believe Henderson County to date has accomplished more testing than other counties in the region, but I agree that more is needed. We are not behind other counties or the State, and I think we have accomplished more testing to date than most.

In this county, we've put our testing capacity together and collaboratively prioritized our testing. Anyone who is prescribed a test can get it. At this time, it's through a healthcare professional.

"Why the jumps in numbers?" Contact tracing and outbreak investigations lead to a large amount of testing in a short amount of time.

"Why are we so behind other Counties and States when it comes to testing?" This is actually not the case. Not all counties are reporting testing numbers but looking at other counties, per capita, we're in line with other counties.

"None of the counties around us have this high number. I have a few risk factors. What can you tell me to keep me safer? What is being done to trace and isolate?" A majority of the cases in Henderson County are located in congregate care living facilities (LTCF, Assisted Living, Etc.). These have been areas of concern for our healthcare providers since day one. As a result, our team provides very focused assessment and testing in these settings to ensure the residents and staff receive the most appropriate care. Each positive case results in "contact tracing" investigations by Public Health staff.

Some people asked when antibody testing would be available. This is a blood test that shows evidence of previous infection. Some tests are now being validated but it is unclear how long that will take to be widely available.

"What measures are being taken to "flatten the curve" against further acceleration?" Education, review of control measures in facilities, contact tracing, expanded testing, healthcare support, and public awareness strategies supporting the standing social distancing measures for the general public.

"How many of the positive cases required hospitalization? How many of the positive cases were asymptomatic?" These individual cases are too small to report. We won't report specific health details of cases.

"What is your estimate of unreported cases in the County?" This is unknown for our specific community. Many estimates are in the 5-10 range for every confirmed case.

Topic #4 – Long Term Care Facilities

Someone who works at a long-term care facility expressed concern that someone at their place of employment had tested positive. Employees should have those conversations with their employer. Facilities should be providing training and information to their staff. The health department and other community partners are active in the facilities assisting with training and education of their staff, as needed. If someone has a specific concern, they can call the Emergency Services number at 828-697-4728.

“What is the current count of cases at Cherry Springs?” We won’t continue to report cases tied to specific facilities. We will aggregate case reports for the category of LTCFs. This is based on guidance from the NC School of Government, our County Attorney, and State privacy laws.

Topic #3 – Stay At Home Order:

“Will there be a mandatory lock down?” At this point there are no plans for a lockdown in our community.

“When will you announce when stay at home is rescinded or extended?” Any plans for adjustments to the stay at home orders will be carefully evaluated by the Board of Commissioners once the State makes a determination on the State’s Executive Orders. The desire would be to give much of that decision-making capability back to the local jurisdictions. This is up to the Governor. We’re waiting on word from him.

Additional comment regarding re-opening: The Board of Commissioners Task force has been implemented to work with business and healthcare leaders to proactively plan on how to re-open and lift restrictions while keeping people safe. We don’t anticipate having rules but will offer suggestions and guidelines. It’s a difficult job that the Governor has and no matter what action he takes it will be imperfect and may not satisfy everyone. Our local small business people are more than happy to take measures that are recommended and are seeking guidance and ideas for how to open safely when allowed to do so. The new Task Force will work together to seek creative ideas and best practices.

“Who enforces in Henderson county people that don’t stay at home during the virus?” While there are both State and Local “stay at home” orders there are exceptions for the public to travel to and from work, when appropriate. There are also provisions for the public to travel for personal needs or to care for a member of their family. We ask the public to partner with our community on these initiatives.

“Now that there will be guidelines to begin opening our economy, would it be possible for the Henderson County Dept. of Public Health to post a graph of the daily reported new cases on their website? Thank you!” This data will roll into a dashboard in the coming days.

One person asked why a particular business doesn’t use the same precautions as some others.

Many businesses are implementing new processes based on the Governor’s most recent executive orders for businesses. Each is evaluating their model and applying the best practices based on their facility. Public Health will help people upon request, however, it’s up to those businesses.

Some commented on the concern that not all citizens are taking this seriously and following the guidelines. You are correct, we are all in this together and we all contribute to the success of our initiatives.

Topic #5 – Hot Spots

Some commented that the public needs to be informed so they can reduce their risk. We believe that we are responsibly reporting relevant public information and data today and will expand that model with a data dashboard which will be posted this week.

“Why is Henderson County not restricting travelers from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut to a quarantine of 14 days when arriving in our county?” Some of these provisions have been included in our supplement to our State of Emergency that the Board of Commissioners amended on March 31st.

“Please publish the zip codes or towns of those who have tested positive for COVID-19.”

As we refine our data dashboard, we are looking at the logistics of reporting cases by zip code for the future. It’s important to know that having that information doesn’t change how you should protect yourself.

“Why is Henderson County not closing campgrounds and RV resorts to short term rentals?”

The most recent amendment to the County’s State of Emergency does require the public arriving from an area of

known community transmission and outbreaks to self-quarantine for 14 days where they may be staying. We rely on the business owners and our public to support this.

“Please explain patient confidentiality as it pertains to geography.” Patient confidentiality must be protected whenever an individual could be identified based on the data shared. This could include the address of the patient or particular demographics if the point of reference is exceptionally small. An example would be one patient hospitalized in the ICU with COVID, where there is only one patient in the ICU.

“We would like to see if there are new coronavirus cases in Hendersonville, or are we stabilized?” Cases and deaths are reported daily. Testing to date is still too limited in scope to make any forecasts about future trends. We continue to focus on a baseline of testing paired with intensive contact tracing to target and identify new cases.

“How many Coronavirus carrier/asymptomatic/undiagnosed cases outside of nursing homes are projected to be circulating in our community now? - How many contact tracers are currently assigned in the county? Our county death rate appears to be high - why?” Multiple ratios have been estimated but it’s really not known for our county. We have stipulated for weeks that community transmission is occurring in Henderson County. Public health and its partners are able to assign contact tracers to all cases and we’re in the position to dramatically expand that as more cases are identified. Based on current models, we believe we would have enough contact tracers between the Health Department and our healthcare partners. The death rate is connected with the LTCFs.

“Can Henderson County break down the positive cases by age, sex, and area in an Assisted Living or LTCF. Whether staff coming and going are responsible for the infection.” We are looking at the data dashboard delineating cases by age groups, race and ethnicity. We are looking at also providing counts by zip code. There are several possibilities associated with transmission and spread of COVID-19 in the community including LTCFs. People that have extremely mild symptoms are a part of the challenge to limit spread.

“On April 15 it was reported that of the County’s current 99 COVID-19 cases, 82 are in LTCFs. That leaves 17 in the general population. With full respect for the privacy of the individuals involved, please answer the following questions about the County’s processes...”

Were all of the 17 infected individuals quarantined? Confirmed COVID-19 cases are isolated so that others will not come into contact with them.

Is contact tracing done for all who test positive? Yes.

How many total individuals were determined to have been exposed? On average, close contacts of the 17 people averaged between 4-6.

How many of them have recovered? We have not started pursuing that information yet. NC DHHS has stated some reservation about reporting this statistic since it is very subjective. The majority of people with COVID-19 do recover. Of those who recovered, have all been retested following recovery? Answering this question would require me to divulge information that could lead to identification of the individual. I can say, however, that the CDC no longer requires a posttest to establish that someone no longer has the disease.

Have any of the recovered individuals (if any) been tested for antibodies to determine their immunity to COVID-19? Not at this time.

If no, why not, and when will they be tested? Their personal physician or practice will make determination of need and will facilitate.

In sum: All individuals are isolated or quarantined, we did contact tracing, and tested anyone who needed it.

“Please describe the County’s capabilities to enforce quarantine.” Primary diagnostic testing capacity rests with public health, both hospitals, and our community health center. We coordinate regularly on prioritizing current testing capacity. Public health is responsible for quarantine and isolation requirements along with follow up and contact tracing tied to investigations. We rely on the public’s compliance.

“Please make a County order that all persons wear protective face masks in public places especially if any of the current orders are relaxed.” Many provisions like this are currently being considered. The limited availability of face coverings could pose challenges for many people if they are not able to acquire one.

“What is the hospital bed utilization both in general and ICU (Pardee and AdventHealth and maybe Mission)?” The hospitals do not intend to report hospital bed utilization specific to COVID-19. The healthcare professionals who need to know this information are talking every day.

Topic #6 - Other

“Do we know when Henderson County will reach our peak in cases?” We can’t predict that at this point.

“How many intensive care hospital beds does Pardee and AdventHealth have? How many Henderson County COVID - 19 cases are in the hospital? How many of those are in intensive care?” The hospitals do not release this information publicly. Healthcare providers in our county work collaboratively and keep each other informed on a daily basis.

“What modes of COVID transmission have been contributing to the gradual progressive rise in numbers of cases in our county?” The majority of new cases in Henderson County have been in LTCFs. Their staff are actively working to prevent the spread of disease in their facilities. We appreciate the community’s commitment to limiting the spread where they are able to contribute.

“Can you compare the rate and number of positive cases of the flu and deaths from the flu to the rate and number of positive cases and deaths from COVID-19?” Not sure if we can do this on a county level basis, Steve Smith will investigate.

“Why are you already running out of PPE (masks, gowns etc.) when all we have is under 100 patients? Have any of you spoke to Roy Cooper yet about being without PPE? I am sure the government has allocated money for Hendersonville. Where is it going to?” PPE is used not only for COVID positive cases but also suspected cases and patients. While the supply chains have been impacted, by and large, all first line providers have been able to secure some PPE. NC Emergency Management is actively sourcing PPE and shipments are arriving daily and being routed to the healthcare providers. Yes, we are talking with the Governor and Raleigh.

“If I heard correctly, someone from the County Health Department responded when asked about steps required to return the County to normal activity. He said that we must accept the new reality that there will be infections and deaths from COVID-19 just like the usual annual flu...” I accept responsibility for stating that, sooner or later, our community, state, and nation would have to start facing the reality of easing certain restrictions and that COVID-19 will become another disease that we have to deal with on an ongoing basis. Those comments were not intended to represent that we simply accept any associated illness or death with that disease. We should do everything possible to minimize its impact but additional considerations for employment, income, and meeting basic needs is now becoming just as pressing for many of our residents. The challenge is finding the right balance.

“What percentage of essential workers are getting COVID-19? Could data such as this determine whether nonessential workers returning to work would be an issue?” We have not accomplished enough testing and related data to make that determination yet. That’s a good question because the number of essential workers in our county is quite high and the number testing positive is relatively small because of the protective measures.

Given the impact on County finances, will the Board need to consider laying off county employees, and cutting other county spending cut until private business is allowed to restart?

Steve Wyatt replied that they’ve been talking about the budget implications and they’re in the process now of crafting the budget for FY 20-21. They have a hiring freeze now except for employees that are involved in the current situation. They are making adjustments to capital projects in the current fiscal year. They don’t know how long this will last or how long it will impact our budget. It may take years to “get back to normal”, as experienced with the

recession in 2008. They don't plan to recommend a tax increase. The county has a good track record of financial management and will continue responsibly.

Final Thoughts:

- The next BOC Task Force meeting will be live on the County's YouTube channel on Friday at 1:30
- Commissioner McCall suggested supporting the residents of our LTCFs by sending cards to them even if you don't have a loved one there. They have residents who are lonely. Let them know we're thinking of them.
- Next Q&A Forum is next Tuesday, April 28, at 10:00